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## **Todd's lesson in Wildcat family values - Basketball drama detracting from UK's real mission**

If the University of Kentucky weren't so important to this struggling state, then the basketball soap opera that unrolled last week would be just plain funny.

It could be a knee-slapper that Billy Gillispie, welcomed to "the **Wildcat Family** " just over two years ago by UK Athletics Director Mitch Barnhart, is now at the center of dueling lawsuits as that very dysfunctional clan litigates its latest breakup.

Or, the one-liners could be zinging about how UK, with an exceptional history of NCAA infractions, was destined to fall for a coach flirting with having two - count 'em, two - Final Four appearances "vacated" for NCAA violations.

But UK is Kentucky's flagship and these latest off-court roundball dramas are a tragic, absurd distraction from the real work of improving the lives of Kentuckians.

While millions fly from the university's coffers for coaching contracts and legal fees, **families** scrimp to pay ever-increasing tuition and university teachers and staff wonder when they'll ever see a pay raise.

More worrisome perhaps is a nagging feeling that Lee T. Todd Jr., who came to UK **in** 2002 promising "one university," talking about "a community of scholars," has lost his way **in** the ethical maze of high-dollar, big-time college athletics.

Todd came into the job with no experience running a university much less what amounts to a professional sports franchise. But he's had a thorough education **in** what can go wrong **in** college sports. Remember Hal Mumme? Todd didn't hire or fire him but had to explain why UK had to pay a coach with the NCAA breathing down his neck a \$1 million severance package.

That led to **Todd's** hiring of Barnhart, who **in** his first big hire forgot to tell Todd that Rich Brooks, the pick for head football coach, had a recruiting violation **in** his background.

You'd think Todd would have figured out that athletics isn't a corporate division you hand over to some manager and expect things to go smoothly.

But, no.

Instead he's relied on Barnhart, who recruited Billy Gillispie **in** haste without vetting his fitness to survive the hot house of UK basketball.

When that went south, Barnhart did a speed hire of John Calipari, the consummate schmoozer

who skates a little too close to the NCAA's edge. And - oops! - neither Todd nor Barnhart thought to tell the board of trustees about the NCAA's investigation of Cal's program **in** Memphis.

Now, Todd is reduced to parsing his words on Calipari's vetting so they won't come back to haunt him, falling back on prepared statements and, one assumes, finding it hard to get much traction on his plan to build a Top 20 public research university until this basketball drama is over. Meanwhile, a special session looms that threatens to cut university funding even more.

Where is the good will, the status, the cohesion, the money that gonzo sports are supposed to bring to the university's mission?

The only way Todd can salvage his presidency, and refocus UK on education and research, is to return to his first, best instinct. He must bring athletics under the umbrella of the university and insist on a squeaky clean program. He's got to tell the rabid fan base clearly that, although it would be nice, the university's foremost goal can't be an NCAA championship. If a hotshot coach gets away because UK vets him too carefully, so be it.

That will never be popular **in Wildcat** nation. Todd might not even get the support of the full board of trustees for such a radical idea. But he's the man; it's his job to lead. If he doesn't do it, no one will.

And that would be really sad for both Todd and this struggling state.